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Russia-China Military Ties Deepen Amid Western Pressure Over Ukraine

By Matthew Bodner

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President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping (2nd R) meet during a bilateral meeting at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing, Nov. 9.

Russian-Chinese military ties have grown significantly amid the year-long Ukraine crisis, which has pitched East and West against each other in a Cold War-style conflict.

In November, Moscow underscored this point when Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu traveled to Beijing for a week-long visit to his Chinese counterparts. What emerged was a vision of deeper ties between the Russian and Chinese militaries.

Shoigu announced that Russia and China would broaden their naval cooperation, particularly in the Mediterranean Sea and the Asian Pacific — a poke in the eye of the U.S. and its allies, which have traditionally patrolled these waters.

The point of these exercises is for Russia to show the West that is has options — that

sanctions and attempts at political isolation are futile because Moscow has a friend in Beijing.

Equally important is the expansion of Russia-China military-industrial ties. China is already one of Russia's biggest partners in the arms trade, accounting for over $1 billion annually.

"Military-industrial cooperation had declined in the mid-2000s, but it started to grow in 2010," Vasily Kashin, an expert on Russia-China military relations at the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, told The Moscow Times.

Both sides are increasingly open to selling top-shelf military hardware, as evidenced by Russia's negotiations to sell advanced S-400 missile systems to China. Likewise, China is negotiating to sell advanced electronic components for use in aircraft and spacecraft.

Coming Together

The Soviet Union and China were at odds for most of the Cold War. Only in 1989 did Moscow and Beijing come to terms and resume cordial relations.

For many years, the extent of their military relationship was focused exclusively on arms sales, but in 2005 they began holding annual military exercises.

Today, Russia and China share key interests in maintaining regional stability in Central Asia and deterring U.S. hegemony in their perceived spheres of influence.

In the wake of the U.S.-led coalition's withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is nearing completion, Russia and China fear the Afghan security forces don't have what it takes to preserve stability, and ensuing conflict can spill over Afghanistan's borders.

But no longer limited to regional security issues, Kashin said that Russian-Chinese military cooperation is now stronger than ever, and it has been accelerated by the crisis in Ukraine.

"Cooperation already includes large-scale military exercises, cooperation in the field of training and education, joint military competitions such as the Tank Biathlon, regular consultations and exchanging of information," Kashin said. "All of these practices are expanding."

Shared aversion to U.S.-led international institutions is driving Moscow and Beijing to pursue deeper military and political ties as they stick up for each other's claims to complete national sovereignty, free from international influence.

Kashin acknowledged that Russia and China compete in the international arms and energy markets, where the two countries are vying for position in Central Asia. But he discounted the impact this may have on the development of bilateral ties.

"Russia and China have permanent mechanisms of coordination of their policies on major international issues and usually stand together. They avoid talk of an alliance, but in reality their cooperation is nearly as close [as being allies]," Kashin concluded.

In another important bilateral development this year, Beijing and Moscow signed two natural gas supply deals worth hundreds of billions of dollars, after haggling over terms for years.

"The pace at which Russia is developing energy cooperation with China is significant," said John Lough, a Russia expert at Chatham House, a U.K.-based think tank. Though he added that the Chinese have outpaced the Russians in Central Asia by offering their market for energy exports, together with financial capital to build pipelines, excluding Russia from its desired role as middleman.

Deepening Industrial Ties

China is already one of Russia's primary arms export markets, with over $1 billion worth of goods exported last year, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. But some estimates put arms deals between the two at around $2 billion annually.

Recent accounts by Russian officials returning from visits to China indicate that this figure may grow in the future, as evidenced by the $3 billion deal being negotiated for S-400 missile systems — the first time Moscow will sell such powerful equipment abroad.

But with production of the older S-300 systems halted, and an S-500 system in development, selling the S-400 to its traditional defense customers has been characterized as a practical financial decision as Western sanctions force Moscow to work harder to maintain its status as the world's second-largest arms dealer.

Meanwhile, the industrial relationship between Russia and China looks to be extending beyond simple arms transfers. In recent months, a number of joint ventures to develop new aircraft and weapons systems have been announced from the sidelines of prominent trade shows.

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